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***Quality Indicators of Successful Distance Learning by Educational Leaders:
A Caribbean Case Study***

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INTRODUCTION

While new methods and advanced technologies for delivering educational content have rapidly evolved over the past three decades, there remain questions regarding the quality of delivery and nature of the learning outcomes. Many educational theorists and practitioners, acknowledge the deficiencies of the traditional system, while arguing that these emerging methods bring new and different teaching-learning challenges, requiring rigorous evaluation and monitoring, especially in the context of technology-mediated delivery systems for Open and Distance Learning (ODL). One inevitable question “Is open and distance learning as good as traditional face-to-face learning?” This query gives rise to an increasing demand for external evidence to establish confidence among all stakeholders that there are appropriately planned and systematic activities, policies and procedures to ensure that the ODL products or services will perform and satisfy the given requirements for quality assurance.

By definition, an effective distance learning system requires a totally integrated approach in terms of the official organizational framework and arrangements, including quality assurance systems for providing instruction, through print or electronic media, to persons engaged in planned learning, usually for accreditation, in a place and/or time different from that of the instructor (Adapted from Commonwealth of Learning Resources Publications (n.d). Some ODL proponents argue that if the same rigorous quality assessment measures were applied to more traditional modes of learning, one would discover that many current face-to-face practices are not of acceptable quality standards. In this context, Ragan (1999) posits that ‘good teaching is good teaching’ and that effective learning results from the implementation of certain essential conditions, regardless of the mode of delivery. These essential conditions will be discussed in relation to the emerging quality learning indicators, which were demonstrated in the Caribbean case study.

Quality Indicators for Distance Learning

For this paper, a “quality learning indicator” denotes the minimum standard, level or essential condition to facilitate the quality assurance of learning within the particular context. In turn, quality assurance denotes the systematic management and assessment procedures and systems to monitor performance against specified objectives, and to ensure achievement of quality outputs and quality improvements (Harman 2000). Quality assurance includes all activities from design, development, production, implementation, servicing to relevant documentation and usually relates to internationally recognized or accepted criteria.

Several major studies include the following quality assurance components for distance teaching-learning contexts, which are also relevant for traditional face-to-face-environments (Ragan 1999, Chickering & Gamson 1987):

1. Learning goals and content presentation: well-defined, designed and communicated;
2. Learning interactions: active, frequent, meaningful sense of community among learners, between learner and instructor, and interface with instructional materials and technology media;
3. Assessment and measurement: tools/activities facilitating student response, feedback, progress on goals;
4. Instructional media and tools: appropriately designed to deliver content, support interactions, provide student access and reflect diversity;
5. Learner support systems and services: facilitate technical support, instructional resources, design and development, faculty development and policy changes.

This paper focuses on the successful distance learning experiences of a select group of secondary school principals and senior administrators who participated in a nine-month diploma programme offered by the University of Technology, Jamaica (UTech). Of interest is the identification of quality indicators of successful learning, deemed essential at the individual, programme and institutional dimensions, in terms of how they affected the nature and degree of the participants’ level of achievement and completion rate.

These quality indicators relate to the learner performance (perceived change in knowledge, skill and attitudes); learner satisfaction (perceived value/benefits derived); learner outcomes (perceived transfer of skills and impact); and learning support effectiveness (perceived management/use of resources, infrastructure, processes, systems). The detailed quality assurance strategy implemented for this programme was part of the more comprehensive quality assurance mechanism for distance learning being established at the University.

The presentation will therefore include a brief summary of the lessons learnt from the efforts to develop quality assurance systems for distance learning at UTech. It will also provide a shortlist of strategic quality learning imperatives for higher education institutions in the Caribbean, which are adopting ODL systems. The main argument is that quality assurance for effective distance learning requires core institutional policies, strategies and systems to be successful.

CONTEXTUAL ISSUES OF THE UTECH DISTANCE LEARNING PROGRAMME

The UTech Special Postgraduate Diploma in Educational Leadership and Management was delivered over a nine-month period, to thirty (30) participants including secondary school principals, senior staff members, and education officers. This special diploma was the first distance learning programme of its kind to be offered in the Caribbean by the University of Technology, Jamaica (UTech). The design was unique in its incorporation of a practical leadership focus and in utilising a blend of online learning with a few face-to-face sessions. The blended learning strategy ensured that the programme was accessible, relevant and flexible; while providing experiential learning at a distance for the participants as educational leaders-managers.

The Diploma programme focused on technical training in educational management and leadership (administration), staff development, preparation and maintenance of School Improvement Plans (SIP). Upon completion, the participants attained the minimum requirements to be able to:

- understand the educational change process and related drivers of change;
- manage in the context of change and amidst a turbulent environment;
- analyze the education industry and evaluate their schools for relevance and appropriateness with respect to purpose, structure and patterns of relationships;
- demonstrate an understanding of the role of stakeholders and their impact on the effective management of the institution;
- develop interpersonal communication and group process skills;
- develop the capacity to understand and manage the financial aspect of their jobs;
- improve written communications in report writing, memos and correspondence;
- apply a “Service” orientation to educational management aimed at increasing the efficiency and effectiveness of the institutions.

There were four courses: *Information Technologies & Communication in Education*, *Educational Leadership & Organizational Development*, *Strategic Planning & Change Management*, and *Managing Resources in Education*. Each course was facilitated by two key UTech experts whose team teaching approach ensured that participants were exposed and challenged by the diverse but integrated perspectives. The combined team of experts was available for consultation by email, net messaging, telephone, or fax contact by individual participants during designated times or virtual office hours, each week. Of particular consideration was the need to include an experiential learning approach to the information communication technology-mediated environment to facilitate the online course delivery aspects. Each course therefore started with face-to-face sessions to mitigate the physical and psychological challenges of being at a distance.

QUALITY MONITORING FRAMEWORK

The quality assurance framework served to verify that all the necessary conditions were implemented, and the desired outcomes and perceived values were achieved in the teaching-learning process from programme conceptualisation through delivery to closure. In summary, the monitoring, evaluation and overall quality assurance systems served to enhance the credibility and legitimacy of the technology-mediated programme. One major benefit was the capability of the online learning technology system (e.g. emails, discussion forum, quiz features and grade reports) to monitor the progress of a large number of students, by documenting and tracking the feedback of individuals and groups and assessing the outcomes of the programme.

The necessary conditions or quality indicators for consideration were:

- Learner Performance: What did the participants learn? How do we know they have learned? (Perceived change in knowledge, skill and attitudes)

- **Learner Satisfaction:** How pleased were the learners with their learning experiences? (Perceived value/benefits derived)
- **Learner Outcomes:** potential impact of learning or transferability of skills: How well did the participants apply what they have learned? (Performance demonstration and quality of planning for the future)
- **Learner Support Effectiveness:** How well did the University perform in its provision and use of resources and management of all aspects of the programme? (Perceived use and quality impact of resources, infrastructure, processes and systems)

In developing a framework for evaluation of the programme, the following assumptions were realized:

- systematic review of the context, inputs, process and products (CIPP) in evaluating the teaching-learning experience;
- data garnered from a variety of stakeholders including participants and government officials;
- evaluation of online and face-to-face experiences;
- learner-centred assessments with strategies for self and peer evaluation.

The table below summarises types of measures, verification tools and timelines used for each area of evaluation:

Table 1: Programme Evaluation, Measures and Verification

| Aspect of Evaluation | Measurement Tools | Documentation/Verification | Timeline/Frequency |
|---|---|---|---|
| Learner performance (changes in knowledge, skills & attitudes; participants' self perception re achieving objectives) | Course Assessments & Assignments; Perception Surveys & Interviews; Informal discussions; observations | Completed portfolio requirements with sample documents/artefacts; Problem-based learning activities; Grades allocated by instructors; Progress reports from institution; Analysis of survey responses | Pre-course diagnostic survey; End-of-course assessments; End-of-course surveys; monthly reports |
| Learner satisfaction (perceived value & benefits) | Perception Surveys Feedback; Interviews, observations, conversations | Data Analysis - survey responses; 2-way Interaction with content, instructor, peers, technology, local coordinator, other institutional reps | End-of-course and mid-point surveys; Ongoing conversations, observations |
| Learner Outcomes: (potential impact & transfer of skills) | Perception Surveys | Portfolio samples; Data Analysis - survey responses from participants, & other stakeholders including employers | |
| Learner Support Effectiveness (perceived allocation, management & resource use) | Resource inventory; Contextual analysis; Perception Surveys; Budget Reports | Observation and intervention of support personnel; Data Analysis - survey responses; Reliability of delivery & support systems | Weekly updates; Monthly reports; End-of-course surveys |

Quality Indicator 1: Learner Performance (perceived change in knowledge, skill and attitudes)

The assessment of learning outcomes was continuous, task-based, varied and relevant. The successful completion of the final major task demanded that participants integrate outcomes from all units in the course and all courses within the programme. This reflected the practical nature of the course and ensured the systematic development of knowledge and technical skills. The following table provides a summary of the overall learner performance based on the grade spread for Courses 1 through 4, for all thirty (30) participants.

As shown in Table 2 below, Courses 1, 3 and 4 had the highest performances with over 80% of participants respectively obtaining an A or A- grade for assignments, which were applicable to their work situations. Course 2 was more challenging to the participants as it centered on relatively unfamiliar areas of leadership, yet the results reflect a strong performance, with the minimum of a B- grade. Overall, 76.6% of the participants obtained

an average grade of A- for the programme. Two participants (6.7%) obtained a B+ average, while three participants (10%) obtained a B average and two (6.7%) obtained B- average.

Table 2: Overall Performance for Courses 1 – 4 of the UTech Diploma Programme

| COURSES | Overall Grades and Percentages | | | | | |
|----------------------|--------------------------------|------------------|----------------|-----------------|----------------|----------|
| | A | A- | B+ | B | B- | C+ |
| 1 | 4 (13.4) | 20 (66.6) | 3 (10.0) | 2 (6.7) | 1 (3.3) | 0 |
| 2 | 0 | 12 (40.0) | 9 (30.0) | 6 (20.0) | 3 (10.0) | 0 |
| 3 | 5 (16.7) | 20 (66.6) | 5 (16.7) | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 4 | 2 (6.7) | 22 (73.3) | 3 (10.0) | 1 (3.3) | 2 (6.7) | 0 |
| Final Average | 0 | 23 (76.6) | 2 (6.7) | 3 (10.0) | 2 (6.7) | 0 |

Grade Key: A = 100-90, A- = 80-89, B+ = 75-79, B = 70-74, B- = 65-69, C+ = 60-64, C = 55-59

Key: Course 1: Information Technologies and Communication in Education
 Course 2: Educational Leadership and Organizational Development
 Course 3: Strategic Planning and Change Management,
 Course 4: Managing Resources in Education

Of significance were the target learner outputs, as shown on Table 3 below, which were mapped for the programme objectives for each course.

Table 3: Charting Progress on Programme Objectives by Courses Delivered and Learner Outputs

| Programme Objectives | Courses | | | | Target Learner Outputs Addressed |
|---|---------|---|---|---|--|
| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | |
| Demonstrate an understanding of change leadership and act as change agents; | √ | √ | √ | √ | A reflective portfolio by each participant to document the level of professional & leadership growth |
| Apply their pedagogical knowledge about teaching, learning and curriculum to their leadership; | | √ | | √ | A framework for an integrated examination and evaluation system for each school. Varied assessment rubrics |
| Apply their knowledge of educational management to plan, implement and evaluate school improvement activities; | | | √ | | Draft school improvement plans for each school represented. |
| Inspire and motivate others to work towards a shared vision focused on quality teaching & learning; | | √ | | | Individual and staff professional development plans. |
| Manage human, financial and other resources efficiently and effectively with a view to maximizing student learning; | | √ | | √ | Plant maintenance and emergency plans for all schools represented. A system for financial accountability in each school. |
| Develop and sustain productive relationships with the immediate and extended school community; | √ | | √ | | School policy manuals and guidelines produced |
| Communicate effectively with a wide range of audiences. | √ | | √ | | |

The related teaching-learning strategies included the creation of a reflective portfolio, which provided documentary evidence of the expertise (knowledge, skills and attitudes) gained by participants, during the respective courses. These portfolios reflected a wide range of sample products including: school strategic plan, SWOT analysis, environmental scanning reports, professional development plan, public relations plan, school handbooks/manuals, standard operating procedures, financial plan, plant maintenance schedule and emergency management plan.

Other evidence of practical learning was provided in problem-based learning applications, case study analysis of real-life scenarios, self-assessment and peer-assessment reports of leadership capabilities. The experiential-based approach to evaluation and assessment helped participants to develop deliberate strategies for applying their learning from each course immediately on the job, especially in the use of technology applications for communication, strategic planning and management. In summary, the main learner outputs of this programme were achieved.

Quality Indicator 2: Learner Satisfaction (perceived value/benefits derived)

Participants indicated that the most meaningful aspects of the programme related to the nature of course topics. For example, the first course relating to ICT provided the foundational skills for other courses, while the overall programme context emphasized the call for leadership. One participant commented that the assignments were not just academic, but relevant to immediate needs within the schools.

The least meaningful aspects included the topics on Recruitment of Teachers and the Budget Call process, which were deemed not applicable at the time, due to centralized administrative systems. Nonetheless, the participants appreciated the theoretical framework.

Most participants commented on their increased levels of confidence and appreciation for the personal benefits of the programme. Despite, initially limited technology skills which affected the speed and quality of work output, they confirmed improved competencies and confidence levels as they transferred these skills to successive assignments. Before the end of the course, some participants began to implement techniques learnt, especially proposal writing and formulation of plans for the development of their schools.

In general, participants expressed appreciation to the facilitators and local country-coordinator for their patience, flexibility, personal interest, enthusiasm and intensive tuition. Of significance, the programme retention rate remained at 100%.

Quality Indicator 3: Learner Outcomes (perceived transfer of skills and impact)

Participants commented that the programme was timely and relevant to their needs, and that the design allowed for exposure to various techniques of learning, with ease of application, which reinforced their critical role as school leaders and managers. They were also more aware of the importance of technology applications and the need to manage change for the management-leadership of educational institutions. Their learning experiences were particularly reinforced in the online forum discussions and the webcam sessions. Their reflective portfolios also demonstrated the high quality of planning tools, strategies and activities developed for immediate/future implementation.

Quality Indicator 4: Learning Support effectiveness (resources, infrastructure, processes, systems).

Pertinent data on the adequacy and appropriateness of resources, infrastructure, systems and management processes was garnered from the results of the comprehensive evaluation survey, completed by participants. The majority of participants (over 80%) gave positive ratings for each category of items shown below:

- Programme Content and Delivery: clear course requirements, syllabus coverage, well-organized and relevant content, clear grading process, appropriate assignments, effective presentations
- Instructional Support/Facilitation: knowledgeable instructors, appropriate pace, valuable and timely feedback

- Impact of Course Methodology and Technology: appropriate online technology, sufficient class interaction, increased personal responsibility
- Overall support and comfort level with learning experience: supporting local coordinator, comfortable online and face-to-face experiences, recommend blended learning, timely response re technical difficulties

The following items were deemed as critical aspects for immediate improvement and monitoring as they received positive ratings by less than 70% participants or negative ratings by more than 60% participants:

- Availability of some course materials, technical difficulties in submitting course assignments, difficulty with local Internet Service Provider,

Of note, the areas requiring the greatest effort to ensure programme efficiency and effectiveness related to the technical operations, with some aspects beyond the intervention of UTech. For example, difficulties with the local Internet Service Provider were likely to have an immediate impact on the access to and transmission of course materials by the participants. However, it was encouraging to note that participants rated positively, the timely responses from UTech regarding technical difficulties in general.

LESSONS LEARNT

At UTech, the following lessons from this experience intensified the implementation of a quality assurance system of continuous improvement for distance learning, especially as this was being introduced into a fairly conventional face-to-face environment. The overarching aim was to operate within the general university policy framework as much as possible, without compromising the new paradigm for distance learning. The subsequent approach has been one of an emerging centralized quality assurance structure involving a central management network to co-ordinate and oversee the implementation of university-wide activities, based on policies and guidelines formulated by faculty-related boards or committees

Main Lessons

1. Important to develop baseline data through systematic documentation and constant reviewing of the quality indicators for improvement throughout the programme;
2. Important to outline strategy including indicators and processes for a continuous quality improvement loop before delivery of any programme;
3. Systematic process of monitoring and evaluating quality indicators requires awareness, commitment, participation and shared responsibility of all stakeholders including tangible support of leadership;
4. Quality of successful distance learning involves more than course materials and requires qualitative review of learning experiences, processes, interactions and support systems;
5. Clarity of learner expectations, needs, perceptions, overall feedback and performance are central to quality assessments of the teaching-learning experiences;
6. Important to develop standards-based learning resources appropriate to proposed content;
7. Systematic effort required to initiate, provide, and improve upon quality processes, products, and services continuously;
8. Clear, transparent quality assurance activities are essential for improving distance learning efficiency and effectiveness;
9. Important to anticipate problems and develop contingency plans including the provision of additional funding, qualitative resource-allocation and ongoing commitment for mitigation;
10. Effective quality assurance for distance learning has to be developed as an institutional policy and integrated strategy for continuous improvement.

STRATEGIC QUALITY LEARNING IMPERATIVES FOR DISTANCE HIGHER EDUCATION IN CARIBBEAN

As various Caribbean higher education institutions explore the use of distance learning, the following areas of support require coordination at a regional level:

1. A regional framework for quality assurance standards covering all stages including course design, development and delivery, to facilitate articulation of courses between countries;
2. Regional and national consultation to guide intensive planning for technology use and related quality assurance procedures. Collaboration is required with regional technology providers to mitigate fluctuations in bandwidth connection and processing speed for educational access;
3. A network of local in-country resource coordinators to facilitate direct support in resolving administrative issues and mitigating sense of distance;
4. Ongoing Assessment of technological competencies of potential participants, given unreliability of some self-reports and relatively steep learning curve for some participants in adapting to online learning environment;
5. Distance Learner Guides and other orientation manuals to facilitate preliminary preparation and readiness for distance learning environments.

CONCLUSION

For most higher education institutions, there is no separate quality assurance system for distance learning from that of conventional face-to-face learning. The same criteria, processes, systems and personnel are often used, but with more detailed requirements for some aspects of assessing technology use and impact. Ultimately, good teaching is good teaching, regardless of the delivery mode (Ragan, 1999).

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